

Indian Primitive Art

AJIT MOOKERJEE

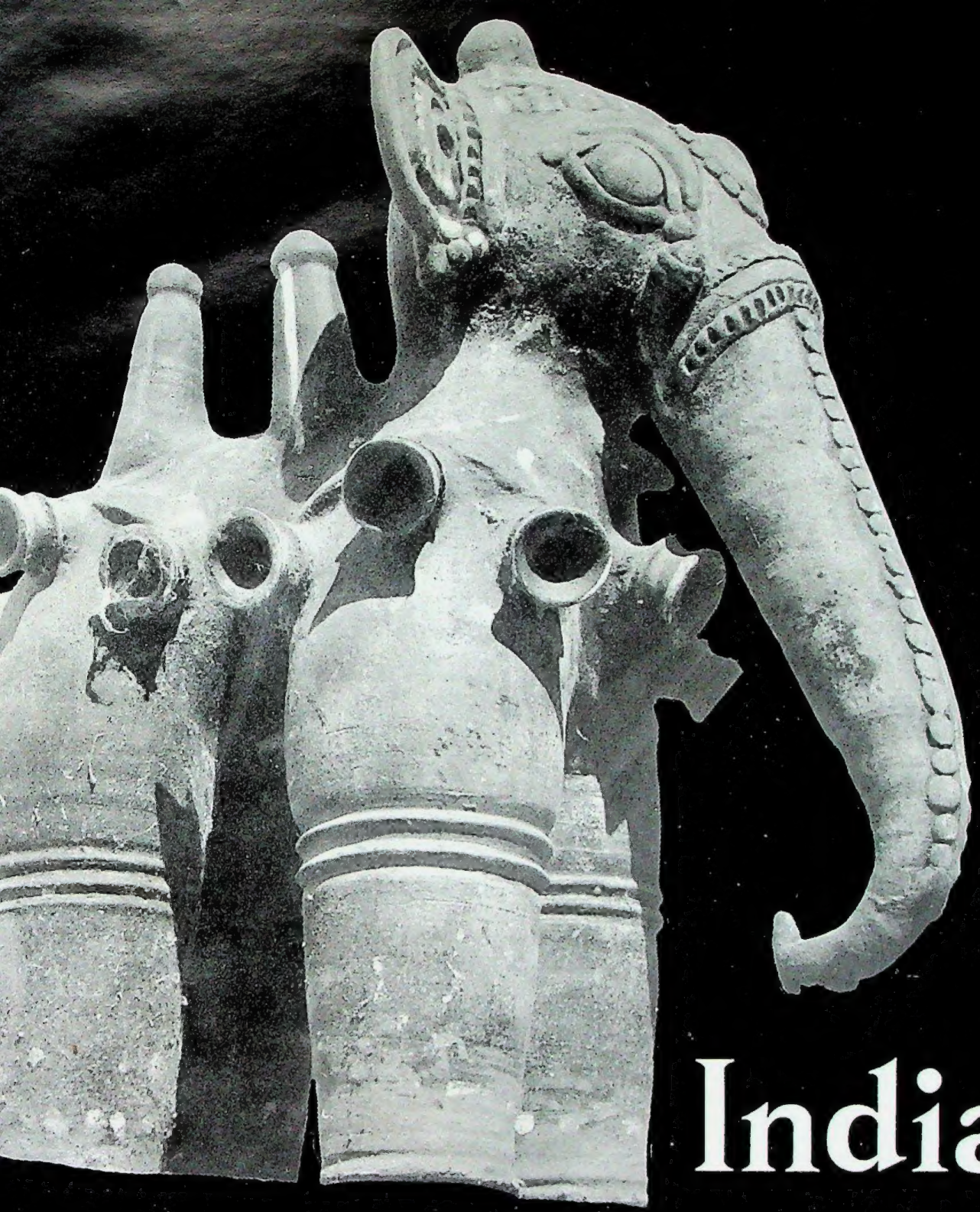
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Frontispiece

Plate I. Repousse pendant from Ladakh, depicting a goddess in yoga pose. (Author's collection)

Plate II. Terracotta elephant (title page) from a Muria temple at Koilibera, Madhya Pradesh.

Plate III. Bhil astrological painting. 1700 A.D. The delineation of lines and juxtaposition of colours creating geometrical patterns, though primitive in character, reveal an unusual tradition. The calligraphy recalls the manuscript style of Rajasthan.



सिताचक्रद्वानित्य
धूम्राक्षमधमासिमता
महोत्तमकवदा
सोमपदेतेमाचैपाजैतौ
दिएद्रयाइ

श्रीसगवान सत्ये

पद्मीपुलकविचार
कष्टउपलै
दृष्टिद्विनेमाचैपडेतौ
श्रिट्टिजाइयत्यस्मी
मावै

चकुकुटय चकुकुटय चकुकुटय चकुकुटय
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राजमुद्रावाच हथिनीकाधि श्रीसतौजीनोमे
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उवाँकुवैरोग सोककहैराजमुद्रावाच
वावैगोमेपडेतो मातातर
कल्लैरणीमोग लीपुत्रनीमापरा
सुख सुख
एषवीदेवबानोनि मारसिमापूर्णे

दिएकृताकरपरकृतकृतपरकृतकृतस॥यक
मकृतकृतस॥एकसुसुवेनासससससस
षीकोदिएमै॥दधमेदधसुतजतस॥१॥

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A. M.

By the same author Folk Art of Bengal
Museum Studies
Art of India
Folk Toys of India
Modern Art in India

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PRIMITIVE art exists in India from time immemorial and has expressed itself through multiform characters, sometimes attaining an amazingly high standard. Paleoliths, Neoliths and other finds, particularly of Godavari and Narmada cultures, almost identical in form with the Aurignacian, Magdalenian and Azilian types, can easily be recognized. It is now confirmed that a diversified primitive culture had already emerged in India during the prehistoric times and had created striking forms, the impact of which has been active upon Indian art tradition throughout the ages.

The rock shelters of central and northern India are known to be the repositories of the earliest manifestations of pictorial art in this subcontinent. Standing

out dimly on the rough wall surfaces of these caves there are paintings of animals and men, generally representing hunting scenes and other group activities. Numerous cave paintings discovered at Chakradharpur, Singanpur, Mirzapur, Hoshangabad, etc. are strongly akin to the prehistoric rock paintings of Spain, while the rock engravings of Edakal and notably of Ghatsila bear close resemblance to the petroglyphs at Sydney-Hawkesbury district in Australia.

Many of the old rock paintings may have disappeared; others have been redrawn and repainted. They have been so superimposed that they offer a tangle of blurred lines and diffused colours. A considerable portion of the paintings, however, still survive in their original state, revealing their significant forms. The paintings and drawings mostly represent animal and human figures as well as some interesting pictographic designs. Commenting on the Mirzapur rock paintings, which may be considered as the general characteristics of all these cave art, Mr. Percy Brown observed: "As usual hunting scenes are the principal subjects and we find the chase of wild animals, such as the rhinoceros and sambar stag, most realistically rendered. All these drawings bear a remarkable resemblance to the famous rock-shelter paintings of Cogul in Spain, which are presumed to be the work of Aurignacian man of many thousands of years ago. An exploration of the Raigarh and Mirzapur caves might reveal clues not only of the birth of painting in India, but also throw considerable light on the early history of mankind in the East generally". (*Indian Painting*, p. 16).

The animal figures which constitute the most striking feature of this cave art are all treated alike. The human figures on the other hand are shown in different attitudes. They are invariably depicted in movement, either jumping, running or bending. They give an impression of a powerful shadow play. Though uniformly distorted, particularly at Singanpur, the artist
12 does not altogether sacrifice the framework of the

human body. In case of animal figures, however, proportions are sometimes subjected to distortions in order to depict movement.

The extent of such distortions can be gauged by the animal generally identified as a giraffe by some scholars. Speaking about this animal in Hoshangabad cave, Mr. Monoranjan Ghosh says: "... one of these, conspicuous for its long neck, looks like a giraffe but must undoubtedly be intended for a horse; behind it is a man riding a horse also with a long neck and in the act of throwing a missile". (Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India No. 24, p. 21). In view of the long-necked terracotta horses found in Bankura in Bengal as well as in Iyennar in South India, it becomes obvious that Mr. Ghosh was right in asserting that it was due to distortion that the horse came to pass as a giraffe.

While the human figures are mostly abstract and linear in form, the animals are usually naturalistic and are invariably depicted in the profile. This combination of naturalistic and abstract treatment, especially of the highly conventionalized human form, appears to be a significant feature of this art. An astonishingly schematized scene in the Singanpur cave may be cited as an example. At the centre of the picture a bison is attacked by a number of hunters armed with clubs and spears. One of the hunters appears to be flung in the air by the animal. A group of six figures painted in black to the right of the main scene seems to have been added later. It is to be noticed that in this panel all the human figures are executed by a few straight and curved lines, reducing the figures almost to linear dimensions. This reduction or enlargement of the body or parts thereof was probably meant for the purpose of expressing certain moods or ideas or movements or force. It cannot, however, be determined with any certainty whether this peculiarity constituted different stages in the stylistic evolution or was of a mere regional or tribal nature.

Apart from the animal and human figures the signi- 13

ficant designs probably bear a clue to some interesting psychological trend of the primitive mind. These designs are found in multiform shapes, such as the sun, the moon, comb, dots, circles, waves, stars, human hand, tree, hill, river, etc.

The colour mostly used is red ochre together with black and white and their combinations produce the polychrome effect. Light yellow is also discernible in the Hoshangabad rock paintings where the most important figure represents an elephant.

The paintings were usually done with the help of a brush but in many cases it appears that the figures were drawn directly by finger tips. Even today this technique can be traced in the Alpana or the floor drawings as well as wall paintings done in different parts of India. But the finer drawings especially the monolinear treatment in the rock paintings could not have been done by fingers but were certainly produced by brush.

In order to understand this art one has to be aware of the basic urge which had compelled the primeval people to paint in rock shelters. There could be little doubt about the utilitarian aspects of these paintings to the primitive mind. It was probably believed that such drawings gave the painters control over the animals, providing security as well as food. Later on many other considerations might have led to the development of ceremonies and rituals of various types. The relationship between such drawings and the fulfilment of desire can still be traced in the widely practised Vrata drawings done by women by their finger tips with white rice paste, probably a survival of age-old symbolic or mnemonic pictographic writings. They have names which the women apply to each individual design drawn by them, though the correct identification of the objects seems to be lost. The phyllomorph, zoomorph and anthropomorph designs found in these Alpana drawings and wall paintings also bear striking

14 similarities to the prehistoric cave paintings of India.

Even today these caves are locally known as **mandirs**, suggesting their association with religion and rites. Undoubtedly they were the expressions of a primeval mind drawn from the depths of their very existence and the secretive and mysterious nature of this art is an adequate proof of their esoteric character.

Modern opinion holds that the prehistoric carvings and paintings of Europe had also some relationship with ritual and cult. Though the continuity of significance is now lost in Europe, in India tribal people can still provide enough clues to penetrate into the significance of the cave paintings of that remote age. Mr. Panchanan Mitra had also observed this relationship between prehistory and some aspects of the primitive art of India of the present age. (Prehistoric India, p. 211).

The art tradition among the Indian tribal people is the result of a long development and is still a very powerful one. Strikingly enough, many of their art forms together with their rituals, customs and beliefs have a close bearing upon the fundamental character of the Indian tradition. From prehistoric period to modern times, they have made valuable contributions to this tradition, thus enriching its variegated pattern.

The term 'Adivasis' or 'Dwellers from the Beginning' now officially used in India seems to be more appropriate for these people who are usually known as the tribals or the aboriginals. In the evolution of Indian culture, the Adivasis had never remained an isolated phenomenon and their aloofness today is due to many untoward political and social conditions. Throughout history, the Adivasis have played an intimate role, influencing the social and religious pattern of our country. Imbued with passionate pride and strong personality they share the same Indian philosophy of life with their neighbours. An understanding of the ways of the life of the Adivasis may lead to the unravelling of origins of many mystic and symbolic aspects of present day Indian culture, the 15

intermediary steps of the growth of which are now lost.

The contemporary Adivasis live in a world of endless variety of rhythm, colour and form. All their activities—religious, social and economic—find expression not only in their crafts but also in dance, music, drama, etc. Each Adivasi is therefore, in some way or other, an artist as well as a craftsman.

Dance, with all its intricacies, is a salient feature of their social expressions in ceremonies connected with marriage, harvesting and funeral rites—some of the remarkable events in their life. These functions are characterized by the display of many art forms. The aesthetic awareness revealed in their personal adornments and belongings is also a universal feature of the Adivasi culture.

Of the Adivasi arts and crafts the most interesting are textiles, bamboo, cane, wood and in some instances, ivory and horn works. The practice of making pottery, metal ware and jewellery is very restricted. The existence of a wide variety of archetypal bronzes used for ritual and domestic purposes by the Adivasis has recently come to light. But for the present day requirements of these observances they more or less depend on the non-*adivasi* craftsmen. While catering to the Adivasis, these craftsmen create forms which are quite different from similar objects made for the village folk.

For example, the potters of Panchmura in Bankura district turn out numerous terracotta figures, especially horses, tigers, Bara Thakurs both for the Adivasi Santals as well as for the villagers. Those meant for the Adivasis are not the same in form and content as the other types and the Adivasi people would never accept anything which do not conform to their own requirements. Or, again, the *Jadu-patuas* who paint the Santal *Chakshudana pats*, depicting the Santal cosmology which is stylistically different from the usual *Ramalila*, *Krishnalila* and similar other *pats* painted by them for the village folk.

been corroborated by Dr. Verrier Elwin in his observation: “. . . since the work is carried out under the aboriginal's instructions and at his cost, it is fairly accurate index of his taste. Thus we find the notable funerary pillars of the Bison-horn Marias being made, not by the Marias themselves, but by Hindu carpenters under their direction. Yet these carpenters never make such pillars under any other circumstances nor anyone else and their product may thus be taken as, to some extent, an expression of Maria sensibility”. (*The Tribal Art of Middle India*, p. 3).

Such cases, however, may also be found where a Maria himself is the artist. The wooden figure repro-

2. Muria full-moon dance





3. Hanging green gourd

duced in plate XLII has been executed by a Maria who does not claim any separate identity from other members of his community. But the skill acquired by the Adivasi craftsman usually brings in him a sense of superiority and caste-consciousness. Consequently, he claims for himself a membership in the traditional Hindu craftsman-caste such as the Kumbhakara (potter), Sutradhara (wood carver), etc. But a potter, a metal caster or a jeweller in the same Muria or Maria stock, though claims a separate entity, generally shows no difference in his mode of life and culture from the other members of that community.

It is strongly evidenced in case of the metal casters commonly known as the Mals or the Dhokras in Bengal, Ghungur Gara in Bihar, or Ghasias in Bastar.



4. Gourd ladle measure

These craftsmen reveal strikingly similar mode of life though they have not only lost touch with each other but also have become isolated from other Adivasi as well as the non-advasi people. It is, however, surprising to find how the technique of bronze casting practised in India from the prehistoric age survives in what these groups of people still produce. The style is remarkable for spirited expression, while its adaptation from the primitive craft of basketry is obvious. The universal practice is *cire perdue*, i.e., the lost-wax process. These craftsmen, particularly the Mals, make the rudimentary form of the object in a special kind of clay of loam and soil from rat's hole and ant hills, mixed with sand and rice husk (these components prevent the object from cracking even after exposure to intense heat). A wax coat-

ing is then applied. For pelleting and designing, resin-mixed wax thread is worked out on the body according to requirements. The whole thing is again covered with layers of the different components of the special clay, with the addition of chopped jute or hay.

At the highest point of the mould a funnel is opened through which pieces of metal are dropped and the mould is kept slanting at the time of firing. From the smoke coming out of the funnel the worker conjectures that the metal is ready and he immediately turns the mould into the right position. It is left to cool overnight and the cast is then taken off.

The *cire perdue* casting, which is quite widespread in India, may have had a common origin. Even now traces of lost-wax process can be found in the extensive hilly belt skirting the alluvial plains of India. In the Himalayas, there is an equally strong tradition of *repousse* work preserved in the primitive types of jewellery and amulets (plate I) particularly in Ladakh.

The professional artist or craftsman among the Adivasis is normally a member of a small and closely knit community. Under ordinary circumstances he works for his own community, with the requirements of which he is thoroughly acquainted. As he carves or paints, all other members of the same group, though not equally proficient, can also do it. In their attempt to make similar forms, they experience the same mental conditions, thus identifying themselves with the master craftsman, the significance of whose products can readily be assessed by his fellow folks.

The producer is almost invariably the consumer and all the family members participate in the productive activity. A home thus becomes a small family workshop in which the old, the adult and the child perform one or the other duty in accomplishing a job to his or her capacity and aptitudes. The complete infusion of group emotion is a characteristic of their art.

20 In his study of the fundamental traits of primitive

art, Dr. Franz Boas maintains: "Permanence of form is also favoured by the participation of many individuals in the manufacture of objects. In most cases every person supplies his own needs. The number of original minds is certainly no longer in primitive society than in our own, although I do not believe that it is any smaller. The bulk of the makers of objects of everyday use are, therefore, imitators, not originators, and the mass of uniform material that is in use and constantly seen will restrict the free play of imagination of the original minds. The desire for deliberate attempts to create something novel, that characterizes the industries of our time, is not present, just as little as it is present among our peasants, so far as they are uncontaminated by city influences. I do not mean to imply that primitive forms are absolutely stable. Nothing could be farther from the truth; but the conscious striving for change that characterizes our fashions is rare". (Primitive Art, p. 150)

The Adivasi art is therefore not meant to serve an aesthetic end. It is rigidly controlled by the age-old conventions in which the meaning of each motif has been unalterably fixed. If his works appear naïve, it is only because the details, either unimportant or taboo, are avoided. This is the reason why the Bhil gates with bird motifs in wood representing totems appear so simple.

It is not easy to find a satisfactory interpretation of the meaning of motifs, as the same motif may be interpreted in different ways and the same idea may be embodied in different forms. Even the primitive artist cannot always explain why they make a particular design or why a particular composition appears more satisfactory than the other. The symbolic content of the design may not always be obvious and often the meaning does not emerge at once. For instance, drawings made by the Bhils in connection with rites and ceremonies can also be used as household decorations which may not reveal the same symbolic content. Deco- 21

rative designs may appear even in dreams. Speaking of the Saora pictographs, Dr. Verrier Elwin writes: " . . when a picture is to be made, the householder may either make it himself following the inspiration of his dreams, or he may entrust the task to the Kuranmaran if he is gifted that way, or he may send for the Ittalmaran. The artist comes to the house the evening before he is to start his work. The householder places a small basket of rice and a pot of palm-wine on the ground before the wall on which the picture will be made and the Ittalmaran offers them to the demigod or ghost and says, "I am an ignorant fellow; I know nothing, but I have been told to make you a house. If I make any mistakes, do not punish me, for it will not be my fault".

If the householder or the Kuranmaran has not had a dream giving the design of the picture, the Ittalmaran sleeps beside the dedicated rice before the wall with a view to getting a dream himself. Whether his slumbers are actually disturbed or not, he generally has the sense to declare next morning that he knows exactly what to do". (ibid., p. 187).

Many of the art forms of the Adivasis are results of deep spiritual experience, the innate meanings of which cannot be clearly understood in terms of our own aesthetic reactions. In particular areas, however, there may be a key design which unlocks the secrets of the origin of other designs. But the mass of significance attached to these designs had been the product of an age-old emotional contact conditioned by the environment and social behaviour of a people and does not easily reveal itself to the uninitiated.

That is why the underlying primitive character upsets the norm because it throws up realities and symbols that are far removed from the commonplace and the conventional. It charges the apparent, the insignificant, with strangely evocative ideas and associations. It is drawn from a life that has retained its

of a child, which simultaneously lives both in the present and the primordial.

Myths and legends prevalent among the Adivasis form another important factor in their art. These stimulate dramatic intensity resulting in distortions and exaggerations and the use of strongly contrasting colours. A village potter can make a tiger without any story element, but a tiger for the Adivasi people must have some association with a legend or rite. The Adivasi women of the Rani Paraj area in Western India make terracotta votive offerings which are bold examples of such form and fantasy. This form is however not an isolated phenomenon in Rani Paraj alone but the same typical form of the votive cow can be found in the deer-rattle, recently discovered at Harinarayanpur in West Bengal (plate VII) which in all likelihood may be of prehistoric origin. Here is an example of how significant forms have survived in the Adivasi art through centuries, notwithstanding their use either as votive offerings or as toys. It is, however, difficult to say when a toy becomes a votive offering or a votive figure turns a toy, but undoubtedly the form is the same.

Examples where votive offerings have retained their primitive forms but have completely lost their original significance are also not rare. Mr. Sudhangsu K. Ray mentions in his article on Folk Art of Bengal: "Even today, we get the most typical examples of terracotta statuettes of the bird-mother from the districts of Pabna and Mymensingh situated in North-East Bengal, right opposite to Sata hills. She has a bird's (duck?) head with hooded coiffure. The lower part of her body, modelled in human form, is draped with ornamental mekhala (skirt). She holds children with her two arms and on two thighs. The nestlings suck milk from her exposed breasts. She nurses, feeds and caresses her children—she is our grand-old totem-mother from whom many of us have been 'anthropologically' born. It is now used simply as a child's doll 23



and no other importance is attached to it by the adults; rather it seems meaningless to many of us, as the modern society has left the primitive phases of our culture far behind in which this brata-doll was deeply rooted. But we are extremely grateful to the Rarhi-Kumbhakaras of North Bengal for furnishing us with the documents of an important art tradition that began to flow from an age which we have now totally forgotten". (Roopa-Lekha, December 1958, p. 77).

The exact reason behind this phenomenon is difficult to explain. But it is evident that once the aesthetic awareness of the Adivasis is evoked by a pattern, it tends to resist any significant modification. In communities living in isolation, where tradition is passed on by oral transmission and technical skill is handed down from mother to daughter and father to son, there is little scope for modification in the traditional forms and motifs.

Under such conditions, countless recapitulations resulted in a state of mind in which an Adivasi artist could reproduce the most abstract without any conscious effort. Even where he made an important change, he was perhaps unaware of it. He could introduce new patterns, give the old a new look, but the possibilities of a radical assertion of his individuality in the modern sense were very much limited because of the total impact of a social and religious structure.

In this connection it may be pointed out that the cult of the totem is an important feature in the Adivasi culture. The totems have conditioned not only the life and thought of the people but have considerably influenced their arts and crafts. The totem is deeply revered in each clan and many of the significant forms and colours used by these people are found to bear intimate relationship to their respective totems which are propitiated through rituals and magic. In the wake of this belief in magic not only the art forms but also the tools and materials assume considerable significance.

The case of the Jadu-patuas may be cited as an interesting example of this magical aspect of the Adivasi

culture. Bordering Birbhum, Manbhum, and Santal Parganas, these Jadu-patuas (the magic painters) paint a type of scroll known as the Paralaukika Chitra (painting of the deceased in the other world). About this painting, Mr. G. S. Dutt writes: "Whenever a Santal man, woman or child dies the Jadu-Patua appears at the house of the bereaved family with a readymade sketch of the deceased done from his own imagination. There is no attempt at verisimilitude but the picture merely consists of drawing of an adult child or a male or a female, according to the age and sex of the deceased. The Jadu-Patua presents the picture completely drawn in colour with one omission only, viz., the iris of the eye. He shows the picture to the relatives and tells them that the deceased is wandering about blindly in the other world and will continue to do so until they send gifts of money or some other articles through him, viz., Jadu-Patua himself, so that he can perform the act of *Chakshudana* or bestowal of eye-sight. The Santals believe this to be actually true and give themselves to weeping at the misery of their deceased relative wandering almost blindly in the other world. They protest that they have already given gifts to him at his death but the Jadu-Patua remains adamant and tells them that king Yama has taken away the gifts, which they made with the body of the deceased and so they must send the deceased more things through him (i.e., the Jadu-Patua) in order to satisfy his needs. So the relatives make presents of money or some other articles of domestic use to the Jadu-Patua for transmission to the deceased and the Jadu-Patua then puts the finishing touch to the picture by performing the act of *Chakshudana* or supplying the iris of the eye in the picture of the deceased. It is perhaps from this semi-magical practice that the Jadu-Patua derives his name (Jadu—magic, Patua—painter)". (Modern Review, Nov. 1932, pp. 527-28).

But in any case, magic, though an important aspect of the Adivasi culture, should not be unduly

The art tradition of the Adivasis does not encourage any mass production and time is of no consideration in the execution of their work. The weaving of a piece of textile may take even six months or more for its completion but this does not at all trouble Adivasi weavers, mostly women.

The different processes of carding, spinning, sizing and finally weaving, involved in the production of textiles, both cotton and wool, are slow and laborious. This characteristic is well illustrated by the textiles of the Todas, Bondos, Saoras, Godabas and the Nagas who have preserved the most attractive and primitive types of textiles in India. The Naga textiles present a wide range of colours and designs produced on simple tension looms. The Nagas are fond of pure colours like white, red, black and green, often combined to produce great effect. The designs are highly stylized and there is a special emphasis on geometrical patterns. The most fascinating specimens are the ceremonial blankets and the war-bands made of cotton and wool. Broad bands formed of continuous diamond-shaped designs mainly constitute the ground of the war-bands or the borders of the blankets. Whereas many small irregular areas composed of interwoven patterns in colour decorate the rest of the ground. The two edges of the textiles are generally fringed or plaited by the addition of more wool and cotton.

The motifs are often symbolical and consist of abstract figures of animals and human beings as well as birds and flowers. The Tongkhul Naga blankets have a special type of decoration representing heavenly phenomena. Undoubtedly, the Naga textile designs have evolved through long experience and many generations. The characteristic forms of these decorations, the technical structure as well as the style of their artistic expressions are strictly local in their development. The geometric patterns include the zig-zag, the spiral and the meandered guilloche, their origin being reminiscent of local basketry tradition. On the other hand, the Bhil

textiles present an attractive range of printed designs. In both cases, units of textiles are generally made in separate pieces and are invariably sewn together at a later stage. On actual use, these textiles assume a special meaning and significance.

Particularly conscious of the use of his product, the Adivasi artist visualizes the object against every possible background and in all conceivable circumstances, taking into consideration the light and shade as well as movements which will bring his work of art into view. For example, a mask of the Muria or Gond or Bhil, ordinarily looking inert and lifeless, will immediately spring into life and action when in use. This dramatic change is not possible unless the artist has merged his entity deeply in the context.

The Adivasi art is inseparably linked with the material and the circumstances under which the object is to be handled. His mental image is impregnated with the qualities of the material; if it is to be in wood, he thinks in terms of wood and starts executing directly on the object, with no intervention of previously drawn sketches. Not only does he think in terms of the material but also tries to preserve the inherent, natural aptitudes of the thing, its grains, bends, curves, growths and the depressions. Finally, the material is passed through ritual ceremonies in order to impregnate it with the vitality of life. The wooden figure reproduced in plate XLII has been carved by a Maria artist from a tree, the bifurcated branches having been utilized as two legs. Arms have been fixed in the sockets separately while the other two holes indicate breasts.

In spite of the persistence of the technique of making human or animal figures by socketing together separately made units, the Adivasi sculptures always offer a unified whole. This primitive tradition in India is strikingly different from the Negro sculptures which is to be viewed not as an inviolable whole but as constituted of distinct units : the head, limbs, breasts, trunk

and so on, each existing by itself. The Indian art tradition beginning from the Harappa culture, retaining much of the simplicity of the Adivasi art, reveals a self-contained continuity, where sections smoothly and intelligibly merge into the total volume. "It is very likely that, in conformity with the intense monistic striving of the Indian mind, the greater sculptors attempted to unite the contours of the many different forms composing a single figure into a single contour or lightline, with as few breaks as possible, and with even those breaks neatly carried over. In some works, like the goddesses of Aurangabad, this continuity is virtually complete. From this intention probably springs the often observed "suavity" and "fluidity" of Indian sculpture. From it too derives the common technique adopted by the Indians for dealing with incidental ornament or the folds of drapery, as mere incised lines, or slightly raised sinuous panels on otherwise continuous surfaces. The association between these conceptions and the strip-cutting technique will be obvious". (Mr. Philip Rawson's article on "The Method of Indian Sculpture", *Oriental Art*, Vol. IV, No. 4, p. 139).

In some cases even the minds of the male and the female are found to react in different manners while making an object. Among the Eastern Rengama Nagas, it is recorded, a woman's rice basket (akhutsa) must have a pointed base while the bottom of the basket (pechikhu) made by a man is flat, sex playing a definite role in determining the shapes and forms. It is, however, surprising that the Adivasi art is virtually free from bandha (erotic) representations, though sex indications obviously connected with fertility, are not infrequent. It might be interesting to note that while engaged in executing cult objects, an Adivasi artist would almost invariably refrain from sexual act. This practice of continence prevails even among many contemporary traditional artists, especially potters, engaged in the production of divine images. In some cases, 29

decorations are conditioned also by the particular stage in life. For example, a Baiga girl is given a triangular tattoo mark on her forehead; after puberty a peacock is tattooed on her breasts and tattooing of legs, knees, thighs and back are usually done after marriage. In spite of the Adivasi artist's inclination for symbols connected with fertility, the absence of representation of the phallus, either in naturalistic or conventionalized form, cannot be overlooked. The earliest phallic emblems are claimed to have been discovered at Mohenjo-daro, and to establish their phallic identity Sir John Marshall writes: "And that these objects were, in fact, **lingas** seems highly probable from their shape, which in spite of its conventionality, inevitably calls to mind the **linga** from Mughal Ghundai. In medieval and modern India it is only very rarely that **lingas** take at all a naturalistic form. Ninety-nine per cent of them are so conventionalized that most people would find it difficult in recognizing their phallic character . . Now, the same characteristic is observable in the **linga** from Mughal Ghundai, but in this case the material of which it is composed is terracotta instead of stone, and the base or whatever it was to which it was attached was made in one piece with it, and has been broken off at the juncture." (Mohenjo-daro and the Indus civilization, Vol. I, pp. 59-60).

In this connection, Marshall tries to prove that these objects were actually **lingas**. Frequent association of the word **linga** with phallus is not only misleading, but appears to be incorrect. However, terracotta unguent burners used in numerous Muria and Maria temples, a specimen reproduced in plate XXX, have handles which can immediately pass as naturalistic representations of the phallus. There is always a tendency of such unguent burners to break at the joint between the handle and the circular incense-holder and the handles thus separated can easily mislead one to their identification as phallic emblems. Even in the prehistoric cave paintings of

India, "Depictions of men and women engaged in some form of sexual intercourse are not only rare but wholly non-existent at any of the known sites where rock paintings or engravings have been found" (Col. D. H. Gordon, *The Prehistoric Background of Indian Culture*, p. 115). The Adivasi art still holds interesting clues to the understanding of many age-old and traditional art forms and its reference here is to suggest if the so-called *lingas* of Mohenjo-daro warrant different explanation.

Similarly many of the Tantric rituals can also probably be explained with the help of the present day Adivasi art. The Mantra diagrams, particularly of the Santal Adivasis, display an intimate phase of the highly abstract Tantric art. The words associated with the Adivasi *mantras* are not unoften found to bear close relationship to the basic (Vija) *mantra* words used in Pauranic and Tantric worships.

It is interesting to note that words connected with the spiritual quest of the Hindus, such as *manas*, are also found in the vocabulary of many Adivasis. *Manas* signifies the power of the mind and the goddess *Manasa* symbolizes this attribute. Even in the Polynesian culture, *mana* stands for supernatural power, **very much like picking up a live wire**, almost corresponding to the idea of *Manasa* who holds great powers, both beneficial as well as malign. Another important concept of the Polynesians is *Tapu* (Dr. L. Adam in his *Primitive Art* describes it as *Tapa*), the acts of which bring the individual into contact with *mana*. Does *tapu* or *tapa* bear any relationship to the old concept of Indian *Tapa* (*Tapas*), the performance of which also brings close contact with *manas*? About India's prehistoric contact with this part of the world, it has been said: "Even the first Polynesian migrants probably did not leave Indonesia much before 1000 B.C. By this time the great civilizations of India and China were already flourishing on the mainland and beginning to make themselves felt in the islands. Traces of their influence

appear in the art, social institutions and philosophy of the historic Polynesians . . .” (Linton and Wingert: *Art of the South Seas*, pp. 11-12). Dr. Adam also writes: “Primitive Art in the archipelago has admittedly been strongly influenced from India. . .” (ibid., p. 114). Such affinities are not restricted to Further India but can be traced even in the art works of the Aztec and Mayan civilizations. In this context, mention may be made of the arts of the Nagas, the geometric patterns of which have evidently a ritual significance of their own. Naga design, whether on wood, textile or bamboo is not merely a design but an embodiment of a mysterious and subconscious feeling. For instance, the construction and arrangement of the designs, representing bull’s heads, human heads, moons, suns, etc., carved on Naga village gates, act as symbols of the supernatural. The designs here are invariably blended with human as well as superhuman associations. The same mysterious feeling may be traced in a terracotta head with a circular base and fan-like arrangement of the headdress reproduced in plate VIII probably datable to pre-Christian era. As rightly pointed out by Prof. D. P. Ghosh, it bears close affinity to Aztec heads of Central America.

On the other hand, in India, in the physical forms and physiognomical characteristics represented in the sculptures of Bharhut, Sanchi, Bodhgaya, Bhaja, Karle, Ajanta, Khajuraho, etc. and also in their dress and costume, coiffure and ornament, one can have a glimpse of artistic prototypes of the present day Adivasis, the Bhils, the Murias, the Gonds, the Baigas, who have been, from time immemorial, inhabiting the regions where these monuments were built. Even in the low relief wood carvings, particularly on the funerary pillars and temple doors of the Marias, the affinity of the style of carvings with those of the gateways of Bharhut and Sanchi stupas is unmistakable.

Today their art, however, stands at the cross-road. Cultural relativity suggests that many of their ways of life, so long despised, command respect. What we

have lost and forgotten our Adivasi people still possess in the highest degree. The integrity of the Adivasi life rests with the Adivasis themselves and not with other disciplines. Some basic problems, vitally affecting their future, have been rightly pointed out by Jawaharlal Nehru : "We should have a receptive attitude to the tribal people. There is a great deal we can learn from them, particularly in the frontier areas, and having learnt, we must try to help and cooperate. They are an extremely disciplined people, often a great deal more democratic than most others in India. Even though they have no constitution, they are able to function democratically and carry out the decisions made by

6. Virgin soil upturned



elders or representatives. Above all, they are a people who sing and dance and try to enjoy life; not people who sit in stock exchanges, shout at each other and think themselves civilized.

“What we ought to do is to develop a sense of oneness with these people, a sense of unity and understanding. . . We must let them feel that we come to give and not to take something away from them. That is the kind of psychological integration India needs. If, on the other hand, they feel you have come to impose yourselves upon them or that we go to them in order to try and change their methods of living, to take away their land and to encourage our businessmen to exploit them, then the fault is ours, for it only means that our approach to the tribal people is wholly wrong”. (re: The Adivasis, pp. 2-5).

In this approach, Jawaharlal's emphasis lies “in a spirit of comradeship and not like some one aloof who had come to look at them, examine them, weigh them, measure them and report about them or to try and make them conform to another way of life”. And in conclusion, he says: “one must always remember, however, that we do not mean to interfere with their way of life but want to help them live it”.

In spite of its fascinating study, the Adivasi art still remains relatively unknown. Anthropologists have of course dealt with many of its regional and local characteristics but have treated it chiefly as a source of useful material for understanding their social and cultural background. This art is a rich source which has stimulated and invigorated minds for centuries. It has rightly been said, “Before the Vedas, and before the first temples of stone, another India, several other Indias existed. And, what is even more surprising, in a manner they still exist”.

They exist in complete harmony with Indian tradition and however mysterious the Adivasis may appear today, these are the people “who gave India her first civilizations”.

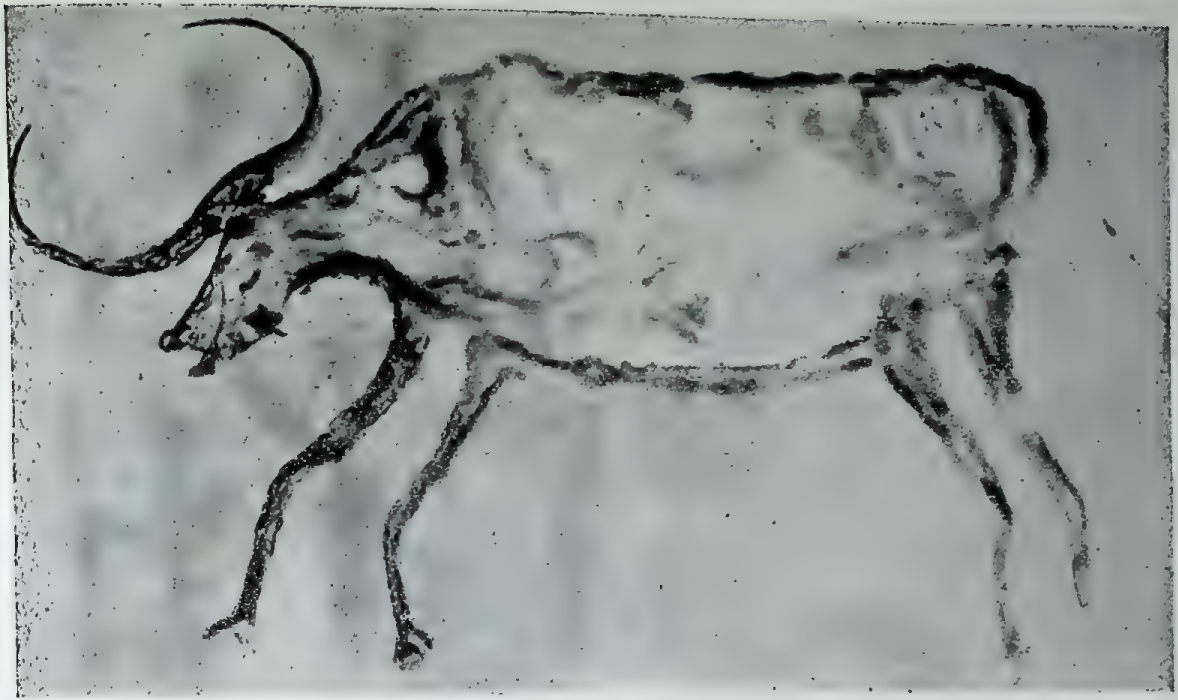


Plate IV. Horned buffalo. Painting on rock wall, Hoshangabad, Madhya Pradesh. c. 10,000 B.C. Painted in red ochre, the buffalo is shown with horns in 'twisted perspective'. Depicting the animal with open mouth and bending legs, the artist has intended to create a state of agitation and nervous tension. Such naturalistic treatment is reminiscent of the highly emotional rock paintings of Spain and France. At this rock shelter of Hoshangabad, there are also other types of animals with 'blades of grass' or 'sprigs' in front, shown in a similar manner as in some other prehistoric paintings, particularly at Lascaux in France. A notable figure of a very large elephant in the same rock shelter seems to be the earliest of the series.

The rock paintings in India were first traced by Carlleyle and Cockburn in the Kaimur Range near Mirzapur in 1880. Later on, numerous other examples of such paintings have been discovered by a number of persons at different places in India. These paintings reveal various stages of development. Those at Mirzapur have been described as "very stiff and archaic"; though the Mahadeo Hill paintings are similar in nature, their subject matters are varied. Some have considered the paintings of Hoshangabad and Singanpur to be much older than other rock paintings elsewhere in India. But the chronology of the Indian rock paintings is still an unsolved problem.



Plate V. Dancing girl. Bronze, Mohenjo-daro. c. 2500B.C. National Museum, New Delhi. Produced in *cire perdue* process, ever since continued in India, the figurine brings out innate primitive qualities in the irregular suppleness of form that is enhanced by the rows of bangles, and by the slight surface roughness. The pervasive rhythms bind the whole together, adding conviction to the sense of solid three-dimensionality. Covering the entire arm by coiled bangles is a typical Indian practice which still survives.

Plate VI. Figure of a man. Copper, Lauriya-Nandangarh, c. 1500 B.C. Bharat Kala Bhavan, Banaras. This Vedic ritual figure has been hammered into shape from a thick sheet of copper. The form recalls the human figures of Singanpur cave painting, showing curled up arms and flat treatment.

Plate VI

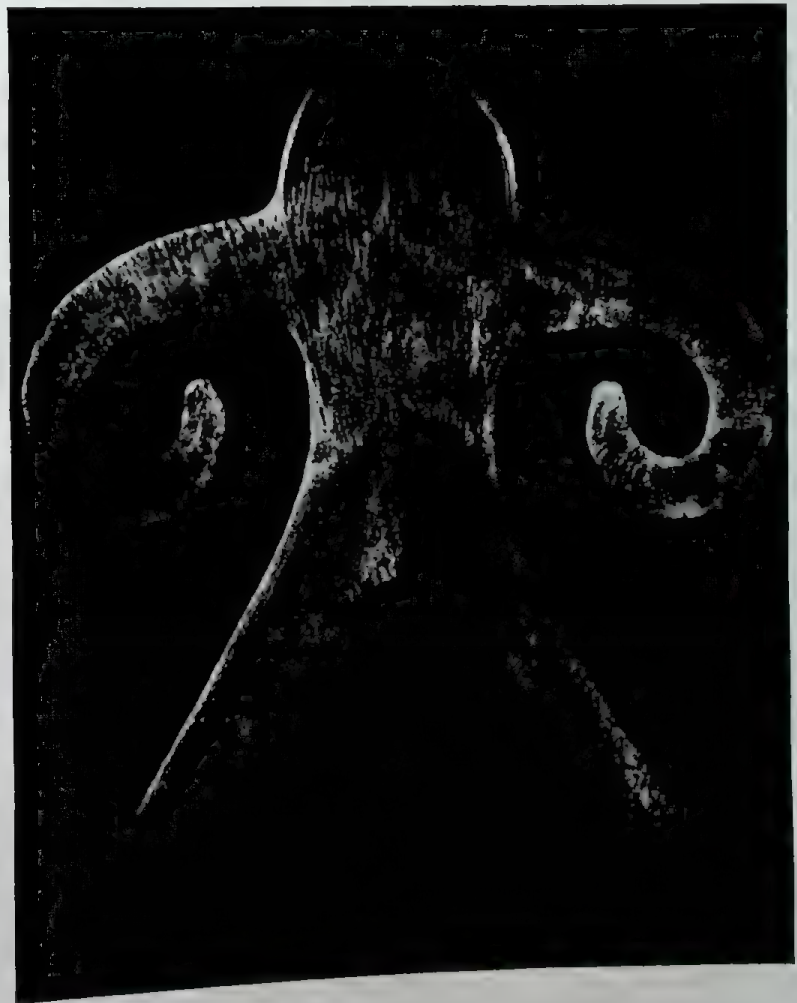




Plate VII. Deer-rattle. Terracotta, Harinarayanpur, Bengal.
Prehistoric (?). Asutosh Museum, Calcutta.



Plate VIII. Male head. Terracotta, Raghunathbari, Bengal.
Prehistoric (?). Asutosh Museum, Calcutta.



Plate IX

Plate IX. Fish-casket. Brass, Bankura, Bengal. 1800 A.D. Subho Tagore's collection. The fish, obviously made in *cire perdue* process by metal casters locally known as Dhokras, has a hollow body covered by spiral loops and stripped ornaments.

Plate X. Krishna playing on the flute. Brass, Bankura, Bengal. 1800 A.D. Subho Tagore's collection. Produced in the same Dhokra craftsmanship, the figure is made as if with coiled strips from the base upwards along the trunk, neck and head. The irregular arms and legs and the coiled treatment of the body are results of strong and direct influence from cane basketry technique.





Plate XI. Radha and Krishna. Brass, Bankura, Bengal. 1800 A.D. Subho Tagore's collection. Produced in the same technique as explained in the previous plate, these statuettes display surface decoration like applique works, reminiscent of traditional clay figurines found in abundance from very early sites as well as in many contemporary villages. The stunted arms and legs along with queer arched eyebrows and wide mouth add to their primitive quality.

Plate XII. Camel with rider. Brass, Orissa. c. 1850 A.D. Madras Museum. An example of the workmanship of the Khonds, this brass figure shows tubular legs supporting a hollow body, made as if with intersecting and parallel bamboo strips. The rider turning backward and playing on a drum is an interesting feature.

Plate XII



Plate XIII. Wheeled horse with rider; Plate XIV. Male and female figures. Brass, Orissa. c. 1850 A.D. Madras Museum. Khond workmanship showing the same bamboo-strip influence. The wheeled animal and the typical dance-poses of the female figures can be traced from as early as Mohenjo-daro. The headdress of the male figure recalls the conical caps made of bamboo still worn by peasants in different parts of India.

Plate XIII







Plate XV. Ritual figure. Brass, Gidham (Bastar), Madhya Pradesh. Contemporary. Craft Museum, Calcutta. An expression of traditional Ghasia workmanship.



Plate XVI. Ritual figure. Brass, Gidham (Bastar), Madhya Pradesh. Contemporary. Craft Museum, Calcutta. The haloes of these Bastar figures undoubtedly indicate divinity. 47



Plate XVII. Four handed deity riding a tiger. Brass, Gidham (Bastar), Madhya Pradesh. Contemporary. Craft Museum, Calcutta. The mount as well as the implements held in four hands convey the inherent force and the nature of guardianship.



Plate XVIII. Elephant tossing a man. Brass, Orissa. c. 1800 A.D. Duncan Emrich's collection. With indrawn hind legs, the elephant in a frenzied state sharply contrasts with the eely man helplessly entwined with the trunk of the animal. Two projecting teeth stand out pointedly on either side of the wavy trunk. The violent rhythm thus set in recalls the Amaravati sculpture depicting the must elephant Nalagiri.



Plate XIX. Krishna (front). Brass, Bengal. c. 1800 A.D. Subho Tagore's collection. In its restrained rhythm and monumental simplicity, the figure brings out modelling, different from the wiry treatment of Dhokra workmanship.



Plate XX. Krishna (back). Brass, Bengal. c. 1800 A.D. Subho Tagore's collection. The powerful back with massive shoulders and narrow waist is gracefully balanced on the swaying rhythm of the crossed legs.



Plate XXI. Radha. Brass, Punjab. c. 1800 A.D. The eyes, since removed, were separately made and affixed to the sockets.

Plate XXII. Krishna in flute playing pose. Bronze, Bengal.





Plate XXIII. Parvati. Brass, Bengal. c. 1700 A.D. Author's collection.

Plate XXIV. Head of Siva. Brass, Rajasthan. c. 1650 A.D. Author's collection. Though solid in appearance, it is like a hollow mask, with a ring-like base for fixing the object on a stand. Bhil workmanship.

Plate XXIV





Plate XXV

Plate XXV. Cow. Bronze, Punjab. c. 1600 A.D. Author's collection. The figure shows a nobility of form and a powerful integration of masses, pared down to structural essentials.

Plate XXVI. Funerary stele. Stone, Barsur (Bastar), Madhya Pradesh. c. 1800 A.D. Relief shows a seated couple along with different symbols. (Facing page)

Plate XXVII. Horse. Stone, Maibong, Assam. c. 1600 A.D. Gauhati Museum. (Page 58)

Plate XXVIII. Tiger. Stone, Maibong, Assam. c. 1600 A.D. Gauhati Museum. (Page 58)

Plate XXIX. Mahishamardini. Stone, Partabpur (Bastar), Madhya Pradesh. c. 1500 A.D. Author's collection. (Page 59)



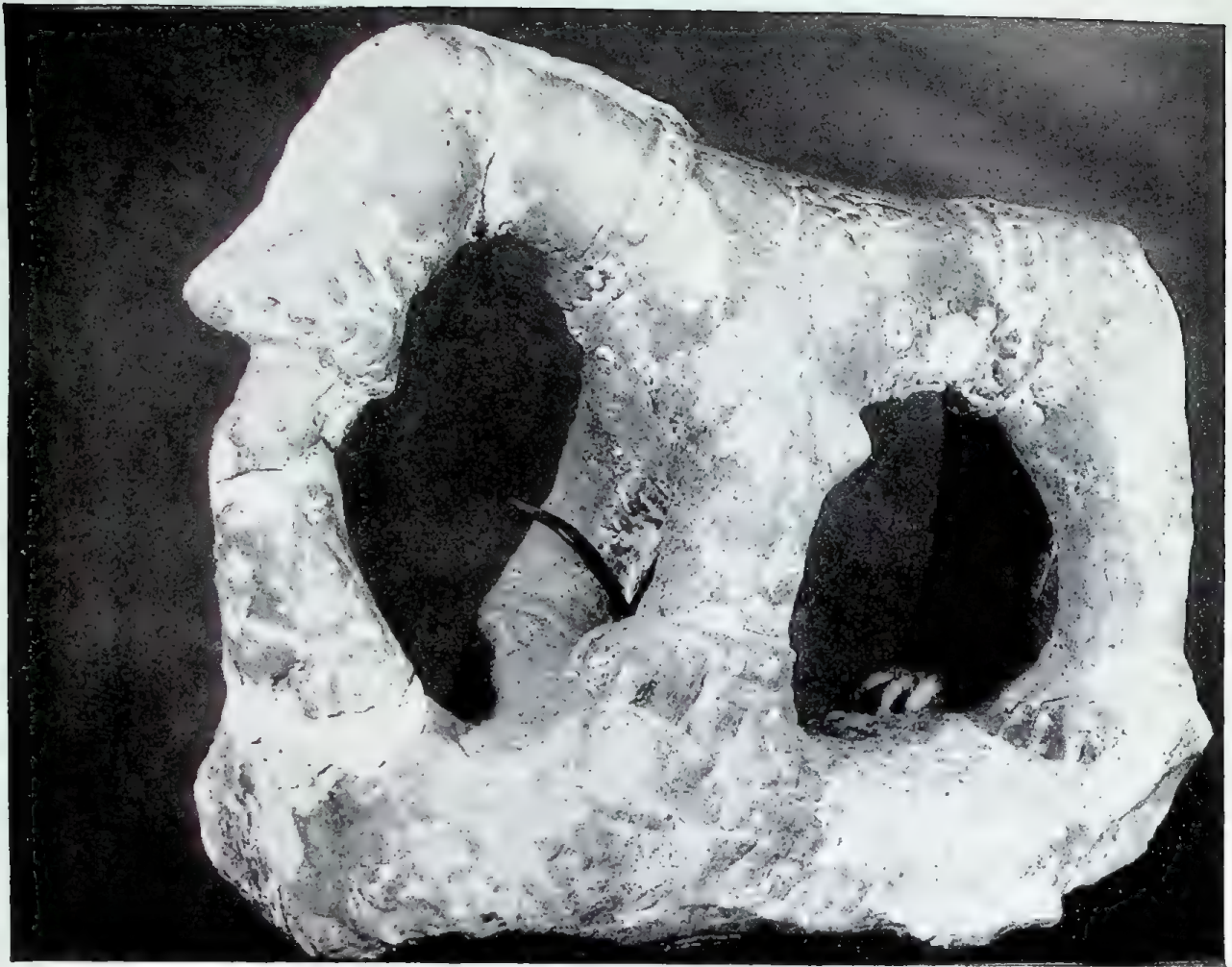


Plate XXVII

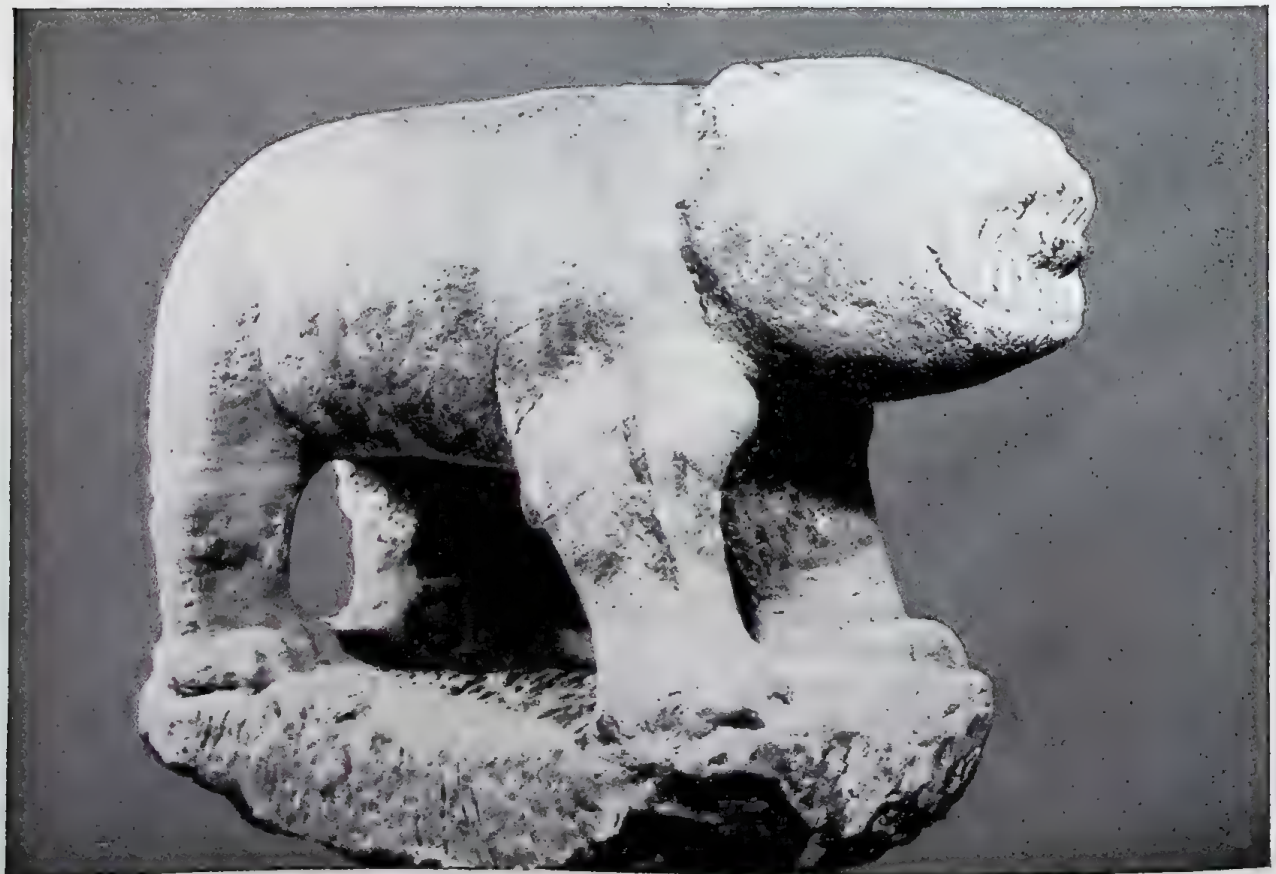


Plate XXVIII





Plate XXX. Incense burner. Terracotta, Koilibera (Bastar), Madhya Pradesh. Contemporary. Author's collection. This type of incense burner is used in the temples of the Murias and the Marias.



Plate XXXI. Bison-horn Maria funerary pillar. Wood, Bastar, Madhya Pradesh. c. 1900 A.D. Carved out of a solid wood with low relief panels on all four sides, the pillar has kalasas and trident on the top. Dedication of pillars in memory of the dead is an old custom in India and can still be traced in Brisa-kats in Bengal.



Plate XXXII. Bison-horn Maria funerary pillar. Wood, Dilmilli (Bastar), Madhya Pradesh. c. 1900 A.D. Another commemorative pillar with panels depicting legends is crowned with kalasas and four crows sitting on animal-headed spokes facing four directions. Such framed panels correspond to Paralaukik scroll paintings dealing with the life of the dead.



Plate XXXIII. Bison-horn Maria funerary pillar (detail). Figures are chiselled out within a square frame to reveal a world of folk-lore full of vivid imagery. The perspective treatment of the animals, and the riding figure shown partly in relief and partly in incised lines are survivals of a very old tradition.



Plate XXXIV. Bison-horn Maria funerary pillar (detail). Four handed female figure, undoubtedly a fertility goddess, holds two lotus buds by their stalks in her two upper hands. The vase-like belly and the hanging breasts symbolize vegetation and abundance. The lower panel with two monkeys facing each other starts a different sequence.

Plate XXXV. Bison-horn Maria funerary pillar (detail). A couple along with children, birds and a snake show a considerable movement by angles softened into curves, then again stiffened into angles and triangles. The agitation thus created is balanced by the placement of each figure at its proper space, so that the entire composition attains a comprehensive unity.





Plate XXXVI. Bison-horn Maria funerary pillar (detail). The panel represents a community dance, with figures arranged in horizontal rows. The heat of the dance is marked by the drummers wearing the typical bison-horn headdress while the female dancers touching each other's shoulders form a snake-like rhythm.

Plate XXXVII. Maria temple door. Wood, near Gidham (Bastar), Madhya Pradesh. c. 1900 A.D. The artist's traditional skill finds free and liberal expression in the surface pattern enclosed within rigid compartments. The evenly distributed plane of the surface is cut into variety of patterns, each displaying familiar movements with angles and curves. The wavy body of the snakes criss-crossed by sharp incised lines, the crocodile with bent tail, a woman sitting with legs wide apart and other human and animal figures, though apparently incongruous bind the elements together into a subtle structural unit.





Plate XXXVIII. Female figures associated with magic :
 Left : incised drawing on wood; right : wooden sculpture.
 Malabar. c. 1800 A.D. Madras Museum. Strikingly modern
 though essentially primitive, the incised figure is brought out
 with a vivid intensity, full of accentuated curves drawn with
 masterly sureness. The appeal of the figure on the right rests
 on its solid masses integrated into a compositional whole.



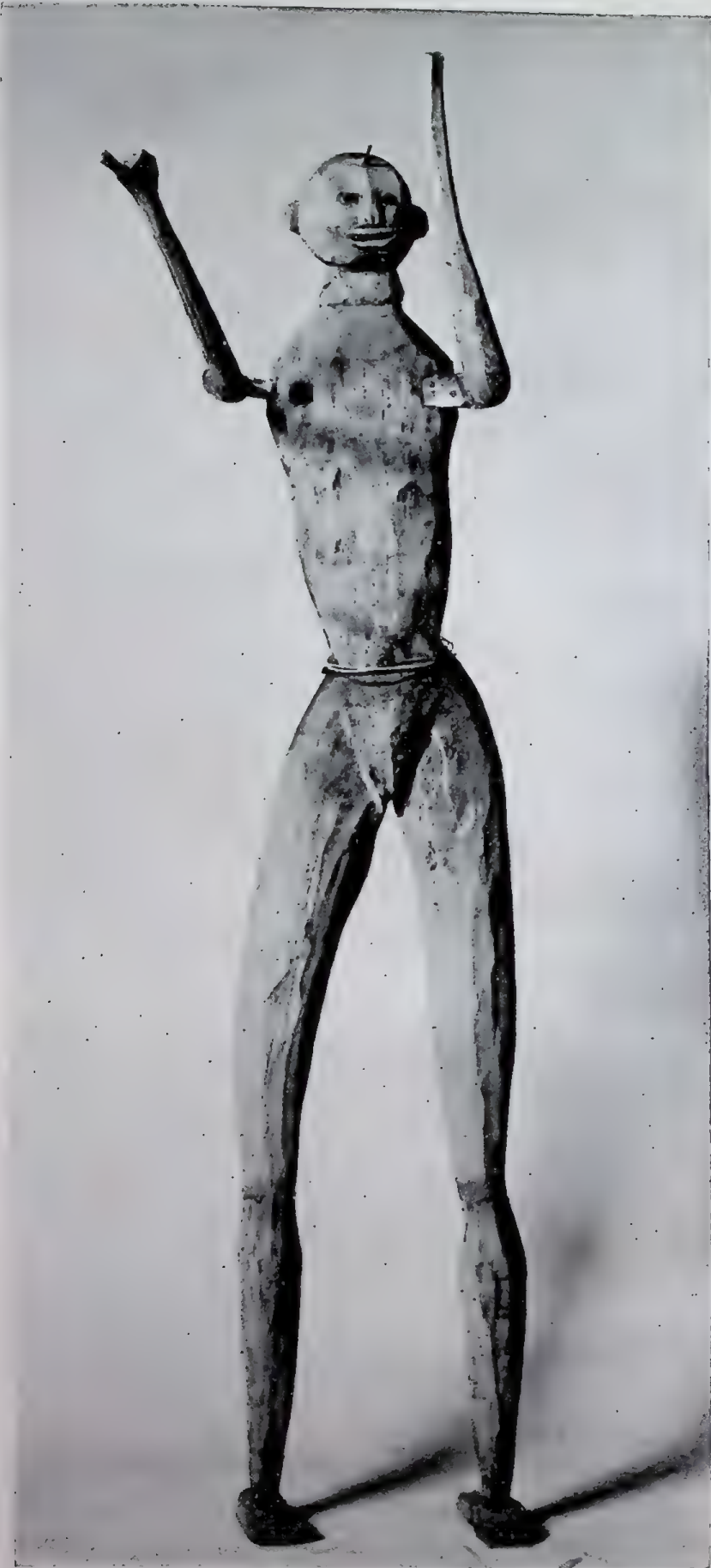
Plate XXXIX. Female figures associated with magic. Wood, Malabar. c. 1800 A.D. Madras Museum. Within the sharply defined outline the figure on the left has been summarily treated in a linear form without any attempt at solidity. The other figure appears to be composed of two masses, a globular head juxtaposed upon a barrel shaped trunk resembling a vase resting on two solid supports.



Plate XL. Bhil mask. Wood, Rajasthan. c. 1900 A.D. The mask represents the face of Siva; the third eye is shown in the shape of a trident. With whiskers, beard and dishevelled hair, the mask reveals the face of a wandering mendicant, a very popular aspect of the deity.



Plate XLI. Bhil mask. Wood, Rajasthan. c. 1900 A.D. Parvati, Shiva's consort, with nose ring and sharp horizontal eye brows reveals a look of understanding and sympathy. The circular face imitating the moon disc emulates a classical trend.



72 Plate XLII. Female figure. Wood, Orcha (Bastar), Madhya Pradesh. Contemporary. Craft Museum, Calcutta.

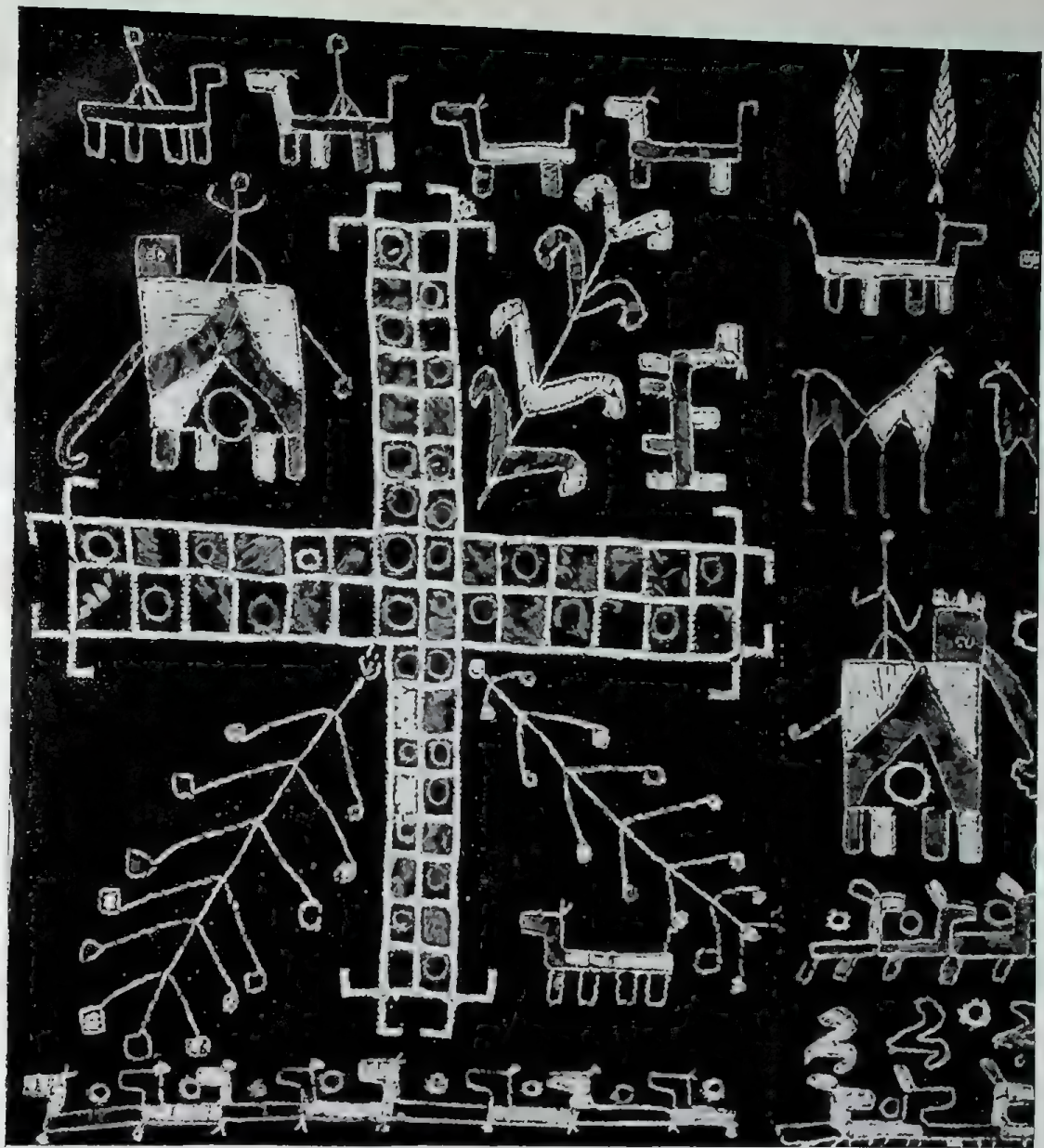


Plate XLIII. Bhil ghagra (skirt). Cotton, Rajasthan. c. 1800 A.D. Author's collection. On a deep blue homespun and handwoven piece of textile different motifs embroidered in brilliant colours create a world of fantasy. Stitched on either side, this unit forms the front part of a skirt. The designs and patterns represent highly stylized architectural, vegetal and various life forms.

Plate XLIV. Naga blanket. Cotton and wool, NEFA. c.. 1900 A.D. Meera Devi's collection. An unusual type of Naga textile in which the two units of woven material are stitched on either side of a white band of cotton fabric decorated with patterns painted in black. Figures of elephants, tigers and cocks appear more extemporaneous than symbolic.





Plate XLV. Bara-baba. Painting on temple door, NEFA, Contemporary. On the front of a wooden wall of a Naga temple near Kohima, the life size figure of Bara-baba seated cross-legged like a yogi, occupying almost the entire surface of the door, dominates over a panorama of designs representing horns, shields and Mohenjo-daro type of bulls painted in black and white.



Plate XLVI. Bhil pictographs. Painting on wall, Rajasthan. Contemporary. Closely akin to the Saora pictographs, these drawings are usually done by finger tips.



Plate XLVII. Oraon wall painting. Bihar. Contemporary. The apparently meaningless decorative devices appear to be symbolic to the highest degree. Rendered within the frames of two solid blocks, the massive forms of the elephants with tube-like trunks and tails express a primitive vigour. The insertion of the words 'Rama' 'Rama' 'Rama' in Devanagari script is a result of modern contamination.



Plate XLVIII. Pisacha. Painting on paper. Bankura. c. 1900 A.D. Author's collection. A detail from a Jadu-pat scroll, the figure illustrates a part of the story dealing with witchcraft. Usually made vertically, this particular scroll is horizontal in which the rectangular compartments carrying the sequence of the story are arranged side by side. The pictures are drawn in dull colours on handmade paper either stitched or pasted together.

Plate XLIX. Two couples in a forest. Painting on stone parapet, Howrah bridge, Contemporary. A unique phenomenon of drawings in charcoal and chalk appearing on the northern parapet of the Howrah bridge, attention to which was drawn a few years ago by the Statesman, a daily of Calcutta, has now completely vanished. These spirited drawings full of primitive quality were done for several years by a so-called mad man whose identity was never known. Like a true primitive, he used to draw, redraw and superimpose hundreds of highly abstract forms only to disappear in a mysterious way.





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